

**THINKING ABOUT GOD:
THINKING THE FAITH FOR TODAY**

By

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A concept project

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

The objective of this concept project is to develop the content of the seminar into a teaching tool that I will use to lead the leadership and interested members through the discipline of learning to do local theology in our context.

To realize this objective I have attempted to create a three week study that will lead the participants in understanding a foundational model of thinking about God as well as a method for working through the model.

I have chosen this form of project because it gave me the opportunity to put into my own words and learning style my understanding of the seminar content. This is my attempt to assimilate the learning's of the course by re-explaining them from my own knowledge base and understanding and then applying it within my ministry context.

This is an appropriate objective within my ministry context in that we have just redefined our understanding of God's mission in the place at this time. We are attempting to better understand our context and how we can most effectively realize our mission of Gathering, Growing, Going – for the Glory of God. This study will give us the skills needed to communally think about God and further understand God's will within our context.

This project takes into consideration different audiences. The written form is addressed to my academic objective and is written with the professors and cohort in mind. The written form is also for my educational benefit in order to see my learning spelled out. And finally, the power point presentation, while also for the benefit of the professors and cohort, is directed to the participants in the study. The study relies far more on discussion than on the presentation of the written material. The written material serves as a guide for the study; however, it is not intended to be presented as a lecture in all of its gory detail but rather shared in discussion with the participants, allowing the learning to go where it needs to.

Session I**PART 1****WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

Slide #1

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Read the following stories as a means of introduction

Slide #2

- a. A little girl is hit and killed by a drunk driver. At the funeral services a number of good Christian friends come up to the family and offer their sympathy. One friend in particular attempts to comfort the grieving family by reassuring them that God is in control and that somehow all things work together for good. The mother is comforted by these words, but the father becomes enraged. "If God is behind my little girl's death," he insists, "he's not all-loving and all-good. Any god who would purposely take a little girl's life and leave us in this nightmare is cruel!" A second friend of the family agrees with the father and insists the God was not behind the tragedy. "The drunk driver alone is to blame for your little girl's tragic death," he tells the father. "God is as saddened by this event as you are. Now he just wants to comfort the two of you."

How would you respond to these parents?

Slide #3

- b. Over the past twenty years you have become very good and close friends with your next door neighbors. Your children grew up together, played together, went to school together, spent many slumber parties at each other's homes and even attended vacations together. While doing yard work in your back yard your neighbor comes over and tells you that his daughter, one you have grown particularly close to, is planning to enter into a committed relationship with another woman. The announcement takes you off guard, but doesn't necessarily shock you. You had suspected for some time that she may be a lesbian. Your

neighbor wants to invite you to the blessing ceremony, but, knowing that you are a Christian, they didn't know how you feel about same-sex unions. You politely respond that you will talk with your spouse and see if you are free that weekend.

After your neighbor leaves you begin to think about this invitation and realize that you do not know what to do. You aren't totally clear on where you stand on the homosexuality issue. Some in your church call it an abomination and assert that they will have no part in the Kingdom of God. Others emphasize that we are all sinners and that homosexuals are no different or no less deserving of God's love and mercy. You don't go so far as to call homosexuality an abomination, but in your opinion it isn't natural and doesn't seem right.

Your dilemma is this; if you go to the blessing ceremony it will be as if you are condoning homosexuality, which you don't think you are ready to do. On the other hand, if you don't go you may put a long standing friendship in jeopardy. What will you do? Where will you go for answers?

Slide #4

- c. One typical Sunday morning you casually look around the church during the worship service and something captures your attention. You can't quite put your finger on it at first. It isn't so much the attendance; that hasn't really decreased – or increased for that matter. It tends to be the same on average. It's not the attendance. The paraments are the same. The pews haven't changed. The pastor has decided to wear a beard now. Something is amiss. You can't quite name it, it's more of an intuition. And it leaves you with a sense of concern. You continue on with the service, singing the hymns and listening to the scripture readings. Then the pastor asks the children to come forward for the children's sermon. There isn't much movement among the congregation and the pastor scans the sanctuary to see if any kids are coming forward. One child finally makes their way up to the altar space – it's the pastor's child; and she is a bit too young for a

children's sermon. But the pastor gives it a valiant attempt – more for the congregation's sake than for his child's. A sensation of dismay washes over you again as you wonder to yourself; "Where are all the children?" You attempt to ignore the sensation and re-engage in worship and listen to the pastor's sermon. You continue to look around the congregation, as if you are scanning for some sort of ghost. Before you know it, the service is about over. As the pastor offers up a prayer of thanksgiving and invites the members to share the blessings they have received from God, it finally strikes you. On almost a weekly basis one couple after another in your congregation have been celebrating fifty or more years of marriage. It is an inspiring blessing, but also concerning. Your congregation is an aging congregation. There are virtually no kids. There have been far more funerals than baptisms. You realize that the ghost you were looking for during the worship service was the ghost of a thriving and viable congregation. Dismay turns to fear. What will happen to this church? Is your church dying? Why don't people come to church anymore? Is the church only for old people hanging on to a past that was meaningful only for them? What is the future of God's church?

Slide #5

2. Ask the participants the following questions:
 - a. What are some difficult life situations that you have had to face?
 - b. How did you go about making sense of these situations?

II. WELCOME

Everyone, at sometime or another, will need to face a situation in their life that challenges their longstanding assumptions of reality. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur called this the critical moment. It is the moment when long held convictions are called into question; such as a child's belief in Santa Claus. A day arrives when they learn that Santa Claus isn't real. They are forced to re-adapt

their understanding of reality in order to assimilate this new reality and continue life within this new belief system.

Slide #6

This is also known as our worldview; it is a set of conscious and subconscious assumptions about the world and reality. It is the mold by which we evaluate, interpret, and explain reality and allow it to inform our actions within this world. Fundamentally, our worldviews provide a model *of the world* which guides us *in this world*.

By and large we are able to move through daily life without much effort because our worldview is consistent with our daily experiences. But there are times when our worldview, our beliefs about how things are and ought to be, is challenged. The tragic death of a child calls into question our belief of an all-loving and all-powerful God. Homosexuality is a highly suspect lifestyle within a Christian worldview and when faced with a dear friend's invitation to their daughter's same-sex blessing ceremony you are confronted with the need to address this conviction head on. If you go, does it mean that you are condoning the homosexual lifestyle? Or, more directly to our corporate experience as a congregation, how do we make sense of our church, a loving, spirit filled, devoted, and intelligent congregation, that seems to be precariously balanced on thriving or dying? The worldview held by many members that the church is and needs to be the center of everyone's lives is confused by the drop in membership and participation. And they do not know what to do about it. The Christendom worldview is being challenged and it is something that needs to be responded to.

Life is full of challenges to our worldview; the war in Iraq, violence in the community, drugs, broken relationships, poor education systems and a government that makes promises but never gets around to following through, and the loss of job security. These are issues and challenges that we will have to face.

But how do we go about addressing these challenges to our worldviews? Many prefer to stand their ground and cling tenaciously to their convictions. This is most often reflected in the attitude of traditionalism; the preference to keep things the same, believing and hoping that the world will come around. Others prefer to ignore or deny the challenge. And still others find distancing or cutting themselves off from the issue one way to ease the anxiety. But the reality is that the issue, the challenge remains. Ultimately, for the sake of our emotional well-being, these challenges will have to be addressed.

Slide #7

But most importantly is the question of God: Where is God in all of this? God is most often the professed foundation of the Christian's worldview and is frequently relegated to those depths. We hang onto our beliefs, our doctrines, unquestioningly. When our beliefs about God are challenged we are often unwilling to enter into a conversation with the experience. Rather we cling to our beliefs tenaciously like a life ring in the open ocean. But is there a way to enter into a conversation with our life experiences and intentionally look for God, who promises to be present and active in His creation?

III. OBJECTIVE

Slide #8

This is the object of this Mid-Week study: To learn to intentionally Think About God in light of our daily life experiences. God is still active and present in His creation and He is calling us forward into His future. I intend to share with you a model and a method for Thinking About God that can be used personally and communally.

IV. OVERVIEW

Slide #9

The course will be laid out in the following way:

1. What does it mean to Think About God?

2. Why do we Think About God?
3. How do we Think About God?
4. How does what we Think About God inform our decisions and actions:
 - a. Personally
 - b. Congregationally
 - c. Nationally
 - d. Globally

V. PRAYER

Heavenly Father...

PART 2

What does it mean to Think About God?

I. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “THINK ABOUT GOD?” *Slide #10*

Ask the participants to think through the proposed question:

What does it mean to “Think About God?”

What does it mean to think about God?

Thinking about God is primarily an intentional discipline; an active rather than passive endeavor.

Slide #11

1. **Thinking About God = Theology**; the study of God. Thinking About God is “fundamentally an attempt to make positive and constructive statements about *who* God is – and *who* we are in light of who God is.”¹

¹ Michael Jinkins, *Invitation To Theology: A Guide To Study, Conversation & Practice* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 30

- Theology is thinking about important issues from the perspective of Christian faith. Theology is concerned with ultimate questions
- a. Exercise – Fill a bowl with M & M’s and count how many are in there (Don’t let anyone eat them until after the exercise!). Ask the participants to guess how many M & M’s are in the bowl and then write down their estimates. Then, next to those estimates, make another list and ask them to name their favorite song. When the two lists are completed, reveal the number of M & M’s in the bowl. See which estimate was closest to being right. Highlight the one who was closest to being right. Then look at the list of the favorite songs and ask the participants which one of these is closest to being right. More than likely the participants will protest that there is no “right answer.” A person’s favorite song is purely a matter of taste.²

Lead them into the following question: When you Think About God, is it more like guessing the number of M & M’s, or more like choosing your favorite song? The point being that Thinking About God, theology, is not merely a matter of personal taste like choosing your favorite song. Thinking About God is faithful reflection on human life lived consciously in the presence of God. Michael Jenkins states; *“The Value of theology is not determined by how well it reflects the values of a particular age or even the theology’s practical and economic application. The value of theology is determined by how faithfully it bears witness to the voice and the character of its subject: God.”*³ God, by the mere fact of being real and self-revelatory, is knowable and therefore there are concrete things that we can and should know and be able to state about God. Thinking About God is honestly attempting to make positive and constrictive statements about who God is – and who we are in light of who God is.

² Idea from - Tim Stanfford, *Christianity Today*, 14 September 1992, 36.

³ *Ibid.* 39

Slide #12

2. **Thinking About God = Communal Activity.** Thinking About God has a specific subject: God. If Thinking About God means making positive and constructive statements about *who* God is – and *who* we are in light of who God is, then it stands to reason that there are concrete things that can be said and understood about God and our selves.

Self-knowledge as a philosophical discipline is an extremely complex exercise. There are several competing models attempting to describe how one knows the self; unmediated observation model, inner sense model, displaced perception model, and expressivist model, to name a few. What they each tend to have in common is that knowledge of self is a largely internal effort. Some do consider the external environment but are by and large concerned with our mental engagement with the external.

However, it is my contention that one can only truly know one's self in community, in relationship. We are not, as the modernist view holds, whole unto our selves (Freudian psychology bears this out with its view of the self being a whole made up of parts; the Id, the Ego, and the Super Ego). Rather, we exist as a part of a whole, as one component of a relational system.

At the heart of Biblical revelation is the declaration that God is love (1 John 4:8). This love has its culmination in Jesus Christ; *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"* (1 John 4:10). Love is the very essence of who God is. Since God is love, He is necessarily relational because love is intrinsically interpersonal – love inherently implies a relationship. Love cannot exist alone in a vacuum. Love can only be expressed through the medium of relationships. This is supported by the doctrine of the Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The primacy of relationships is evident by the very nature of God. The creation account in Genesis declares that humans were created in the *Imago Dei*, the image of God. In Genesis

1:26, the Lord says, *“Let us make humankind in our image.”* Nowhere else is this language employed in describing God’s creative act. Only with regard to humans does God refer to God’s self as “us.” This alludes to the relationship present in the Trinity and signifies that humans alone are made in the image of the Triune God. The author continues in verse 27; *“So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.”* To exist in the image of God is to exist in loving relationships. We were created, fundamentally, to be in intimate relationship with God and with one another. Therefore, we can only fully understand who God is – and who we are in light of who God is – in community, in relationships, in conversation with one another. Thinking About God means a communal activity.

Propose the following question: Who does “Theology?”

- a. Too frequently the task of Thinking About God has been relegated to the “professional” theologian; the pastor or the seminary professor. There is an old saying that says, *“If all the theologians in the world were laid end to end, they still wouldn't reach a conclusion.”* However, we proclaim a gospel that is for all people, especially the least, the lost, and the lonely. Therefore, since God is not the sole possession of the pastor or the professor but rather for all people, Thinking About God necessarily needs to take place among the people.
- b. However, the pendulum may also swing to the opposite extreme. Where theology is relegated to the professional at one end, on the other is the belief that theology is a personal and private matter.

“There is a paradox of increased religiosity in America and decreased morality. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, 81 percent of the American people also say they agree that ‘an individual should arrive at his or her own religious belief independent of any church or synagogue.’ Thus the key to the paradox is the fact that those who claim to be Christians are arriving at faith on their own terms -- terms that make no demands

on behavior. A woman named Sheila, interviewed for Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, embodies this attitude. 'I believe in God,' she said. 'I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It's 'Sheila-ism.' Just my own little voice.'" ⁴

- c. Therefore, Thinking About God, theology, is not the sole possession of the professional or the individual - Thinking About God means communal activity. In order to make positive and constructive statements about who God is – and who we are in light of who God is, means being in conversation with others, with the community. We can only fully understand who God is – and who we are in light of who God is - in community; in conversation with the other.

- Thinking about God is a matter of *“faith development and formation and reformation, personal, communal, dynamic and immediate, in continuity with the faith development we experienced as members of the congregation that taught us the Word of God and formed us in the power of the Spirit.”*⁵
- Theology is a communal activity; *living with others, working, dreaming, hoping and being disappointed, loving and being loved, wishing we were loved, loving badly and loving well, being rejected, trying to make sense of our days, testing new possibilities, examining ideas, regretting what we have done and trying to do better, wondering what it all means, why we are here and what we should do about being here. And as theologians we reflect on all of this common stuff of life in light of who God is shown to be in our Lord Jesus Christ.”*⁶

Slide #13

3. **Thinking About God = Relevancy.** Thinking About God means theology; making positive and constructive statements about *who* God is – and *who* we are in light of who God

⁴ Charles Colson, *Against The Night: Living In The New Dark Ages* (Servant Publications, 1999) 98.

⁵ Micheal Jinkins, 18

⁶ Ibid. 21

is. Thinking About God means doing theology communally; we can only truly know who God is and who we are in relationship with God and the other. Therefore, Thinking About God means Relevancy; Thinking About God, when intentionally done within the community, and not secluded in academia or in seclusion, will inherently be contextual; addressing the communities realities – and therefore have a higher degree of relevancy.

However, people will argue that Thinking About God is not relevant, that it is an outdated discipline that is a throw back to the middle-ages. According to Michael Jenkins, two primary charges are sometimes leveled against the relevancy of Thinking About God:

Slide #14

- a. Measurability – Some will argue that Thinking About God is irrelevant because it is not measurable. The foundation of this charge is found in ancient Greek philosophy. The assumption went like this; “*there is an unbreachable boundary between the world of matter; the existential and “sensible” world (the world we can all see and touch and know through our senses), and the world of ideas, that is, the intelligible world.*’ The assumption drove a sharp wedge between the concrete and mutable (changeable) world and the absolute, perfect and immutable (unchanging) world of ideals.”⁷

This was expressed, fundamentally, as the split between the spirit and the flesh. According to this view, the world of the spirit, the world of ideal forms, was the perfect and intelligible and the world of the flesh, the material, was but a poor copy. Because of this belief it was assumed that the flesh was the prison of the spirit; it was something to be escaped.

The world of the intelligible and unchanging was protected from the world of the sensible and changing. This is exemplified the fourth century theologian, Arius (who was denounced as a heretic).

⁷ Ibid. 32

Arius held that God was intelligible and immutable. Therefore, he could not accept that Jesus was also God for that would mean that God assumed human flesh and therefore had become sensible and mutable. For Arius, this was unthinkable. For Arius, God was pure actuality and change in God was simply not possible.

Arius was challenged and corrected by Athanasius (from which we derive the Athanasius Creed) where Athanasius asserted that God did indeed cross the boundary of mutable/immutable and that God made Himself known, made Himself sensible, through Jesus Christ. “Athanasius took seriously God’s intimacy with God’s creation, the way God works through history, the way God assumed our humanity in all of its contingency and frailty so that humanity might be healed.”⁸

This separation of the spirit and the flesh, the intelligible and the sensible, the immutable and the mutable, continued throughout the centuries to where it was asserted forcefully during the Age of Reason that the invisible is unknowable. They held that only that which is sensible, which can be experienced empirically, is knowable and of any value. It was during this period that Theology and morality were quarantined to the upper towers of the academia, into the private realm of opinion and preference.

“The scientific disciplines deal in provable facts, in public knowledge, not in private opinion or beliefs. So eventually the rather benign dichotomy between the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the intelligible, grew up into the beautiful blue-eyed seductress ‘Materialism’ who charms so many people into believing that she is the only girl in town.”⁹

The assumption remains to this day that theology is a largely irrelevant discipline suitable only for grey beards in dusty book-lined rooms or private realm of personal preference. However, God could not be cordoned off into some far reach of the unknowable

⁸ Ibid. 34

⁹ Ibid. 35

universe. God did something new by precisely assuming the changeable (*morphe!*) in order that God may be knowable to all. God broke the boundaries when He became flesh. Therefore, God is necessarily relevant because God is knowable.

Slide #15

- b. The second charge is one of Utility. This charge states that unless something is not only measurable (empirical, factual, tangible, sensible) but also usable, then it is of no value. It sets up utility as the ultimate criteria by which we judge the value of something.

What utility asserts is that if we can use something – especially for economic gain – then it is said to have value. If an object cannot be put to practical use, then it is valueless. The example shared by Jinkins is that of a brand new luxury car. If you put the key into the ignition and it won't start, then its value has just decreased. An automobile's value is first and foremost determined by its function. It is made to carry a person from point A to point B. All other reasons for buying a car are secondary. An automobile that doesn't fulfill its primary function of transportation is practically useless and practically valueless, despite its appearance.

The test of utility is valid. However, it is not universally applicable. "The problem is not so much the use of the test of utility, but the indiscriminate and universal use of a test which has specific and limited application."¹⁰ There are just some things that transcend the merely useful. Jinkins shares the example of Monet's "Water Lilies." I actually had the opportunity to see Monet's "Water Lilies" several years ago in Chicago when a traveling Impressionist show was passing through. While I wanted to go to the museum, the others in my group wanted to elsewhere. I remember standing in line for over an hour outside the museum waiting to get in. When I was in the presence of the "Water Lilies" as well as the other great Impressionistic works, the test of "practical utility" was

¹⁰ Ibid. 37

meaningless. There was no practical utility in standing for hours to see this painting – but for me it was priceless.

The same holds true for the unconditional love of God. In light of God's unconditional love, the test of utility falls apart. Love that is unconditional is by definition useless because it comes from One who has no need of us at all! And yet God did create us, God did redeem us, God does love us; unconditionally.

Slide #16

VI. SUMMARY

Slide #17

What does it mean to Think About God?

- Our attempt to know *who* God is – and *who* we are in light of who God is.
- A communal event in that we can only truly know God and ourselves in Community.
- Necessarily contextual – and relevant - when done in community.

Session II

PART 3

WHY DO WE THINK ABOUT GOD?

Slide #18

Slide #19

I. REVIEW OF PREVIOUS SESSION

Slide #20

Slide # 21

II. PRAYER

III. WHY DO WE THINK ABOUT GOD?

Ask the participants to think through the proposed question:

Why do we Think About God?

Slide #22

1. Making sense of our lived experience

A couple's daughter dies tragically when she is hit by a drunk driver. A long-time friend of the family announces her "marriage" with a same-sex partner. A congregation of devoted Christians is continuing to age and not grow in new followers of Christ. Your spouse once again faces the threat of more lay offs from their company. Your child is failing in school and maybe experimenting with drugs. Your good friend is going through a messy divorce. Your 401-K has been losing money at an alarming rate. You discover a lump at the base of your armpit.

Daily we are confronted with life circumstances that require us to make decisions; some are benign and fairly insignificant, such as what socks you are going to wear. Other decisions are blaringly difficult, such as the examples just given. Some decisions require very little thought with others demand considerable reflection.

Faced with such decisions we are called to engage our core values, beliefs, and assumptions; our worldview. The very way that we evaluate, interpret, and explain life and allow it to inform our actions is challenged. How do we make sense of our lived experiences?

A person's worldview is largely self-defined, although it is informed in several ways; which will be addressed shortly. It is true, however, that there are several broad categories of worldviews which people tend to subscribe. The most influential worldviews of the past and present tend to be; Deism, Naturalism, Nihilism, Existentialism, Eastern Pantheism, New Age, and Christian Theism. These are all "molds" or "lenses" by which individuals attempt to make sense out of life.

Clearly, as Christians, we hold to a Christian worldview; an understanding of life that is informed by our understanding of who God is and who we are in light of who God is. The primary reason why we Think About God is in order to make sense out of our lived experience. We attempt to define our lived out experiences in light of our understanding of God. Fundamentally, we Think About God in order to not only better evaluate, interpret and explain our lived experience but also in order to inform our response to our particular experience.

➤ "Faith seeks understanding" Anselm

Slide #23

2. **Christian thinking is a dimension of Christian being** –

Plato said that the beginning of wisdom is wonder. And wonder is always expressed as a question. *If you want to grow in wisdom, you have to ask questions.*

Unfortunately, the Church has often held the opposite opinion. It was wrongly believed that questioning is the beginning of doubt. And since we're supposed to have faith, the church taught that we should suppress all questions. This is why many churches still have the

attitude that “you just must accept what we say, and that is it.” Questioning was said and is seen as wrong, faithless, rebellious and sinful.

This attitude is wrong and has dangerous implications. It is wrong because faith isn't the absence of doubt. Faith is fundamentally trusting another person, and this is perfectly compatible with having questions. For example, I love and trust my wife but (like most husbands) frequently don't understand her, and so I have questions for her. Because I love and trust her, I want to understand her better. If I didn't care about her, I wouldn't bother with the questions.

So it is with God. Precisely because we love Him we want to understand Him better. So we ask questions – about the Bible, about Christian doctrine, about life, and so on. Questions aren't a sign that one lacks faith; rather, they are a sign that one is growing in their faith.

The dogmatic attitude of churches that discourages questions is wrong for another reason. Our hearts can only passionately embrace a truth to the extent that our minds can make sense out of it. Reason and passion go hand in hand. Many believers lack passion in their lives because the contents of their faith are irrational. They have trouble *really* believing it. Questioning is a way of getting our hearts and our heads into alignment with each other. The more sense our Christianity makes, the easier it is to live it with passion.

Finally, the attitude that we shouldn't ask questions has dangerous implications because it means that we have decided to surrender our brain over to someone else. We have no way of knowing whether or not what we are being indoctrinated with is true or false. This is how people get trapped in cults! We need to think for ourselves in order to decide for ourselves what is true and false. God expects us to think, for He tells us to worship with all our minds, as well as our hearts and bodies (Matt. 22:37). Christianity isn't a veil to shield us from the world, but rather a way to think through the world

- Value of thinking about God is being open to new and unique ways of God revealing God's self. Allow God to be God rather than force God to fit into a pre-defined category.

Slide #24

3. **Christendom in America is no longer a reality:** The secularization of America.

Over approximately the last generation or so, America has become increasingly secular in its orientation. While it is true that most of the last century in America much of the society could be described by its Christian ideals that marked not only religion but also polity, that is no longer overtly the case today. Christendom, as such a model, no longer holds sway in our American context. Christianity no longer can claim exclusive or even privileged position in a postmodern American society.

Gone is the time when the Church was an unspoken foundation for private and civic life. Two, but certainly three, generations ago the Church played a far more central role in the life of a vast majority of the American population. Communities were centralized around the local congregation. During my parent's generation in an urban center of St. Paul, Minnesota, they were only exposed to Lutherans and Catholics (they may have known of a Presbyterian or two). When my father, a Lutheran, married my mother, who was raised Catholic, his father would not speak to her for the first three years of their marriage. Although she was Christian, she was not, for my grandfather, the right "brand" of Christian. Discrimination of my parent's generation was between conflicting Christian doctrines.

Today, however, our exposure has expanded beyond the walls of Christendom and we are now encountering other world religions in our very own back yard. In the very community my parents grew up in, there are now a Jewish synagogue, a Buddhist temple, as well as a Muslim mosque and several Hmong congregations practicing animism.

Americans are faced with a more available selection of religions to choose from. And for many, Christianity is something that they must choose for every Sunday. The face of American society has changed quickly with the aid of modern technology bringing the world not only to us but also, more often than not, right into our very homes.

Douglas John Hall defines the present state of the American Church as being Post-Constantinian. The first few hundred years of the early church was marked by persecution, imprisonment, and death. It was viewed as a secret religion that met in private, sang songs, and ate together. They were also known for refusing to acknowledge the deification of the Emperor and many were put to death for not bowing down to his image. Basically, the world was hostile towards the early Christians.

Then, in 313 C.E., the whole faith and life of Christianity was dramatically altered and by 394 the once Christian minority became the only legal religion of the empire. This change was championed in by the Emperor Constantine. The Christian teaching of the oneness of God and creation appealed to Constantine, whose plan, as Hall puts it, for the unification of the empire needed just such a transcendental undergirding. Constantine, through inspiration of a vision, believed that he was to go into battle with the cross of Christ waving on his banners and on their shields. Constantine's victory marked a new and longstanding era for Christianity. Constantine effectively made Christianity the state religion of the empire. "There is a legend in the life of Sylvester who was pope [at the time of Constantine]," writes Alec R. Vidler. "It says that at the moment when Constantine bestowed large endowments on the church a voice from heaven was heard to say, "*Hodie venenum effusum est in Ecclesiam*," "Today is there poison poured upon the Church."¹¹ The Church was now no longer regarded by mere theological terms but also political terms, concepts, and aspirations.

¹¹ Alec R. Vidler, *Christian Belief and This World* (London: SCM, 1956), p 16 in *Thinking The Faith: Christian Theology In A North American Context* Douglas John Hall (Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1991) 202

The “Constantinian Church” reigned over the long centuries – until recently. Hall states that “The single most far-reaching *ecclesiastical* factor conditioning theological reflection in our time is the effective disestablishment of the Christian religion in the Western world by secular, political, and alternative religious forces.”¹² As Hall defines it, we are living in a Post-Constantinian present, one not wholly dissimilar from the early church where the world was indifferent if not hostile towards Christianity.

We can no longer live by old models, standards and assumptions. We need to be Thinking About God, thinking about faith, because the world around us has changed and will continue to change. We can no longer continue to falsely assume that Christianity is the religion of the state; that Christendom still reigns in America.

Slide #25

VII. Summary

We Think About God in order to make sense out of our lived experience, because Christian thinking is a dimension of Christian being, and America is no longer explicitly a Christian society.

Slide #26

PART 4

HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT GOD?

I. EXERCISE

Slide #27

1. Ask the following question of the participants and write down their responses on large paper, chalkboard, or dry-erase marker board. Allow five minutes to do this:

“Tell me about God”

Slide#28

¹² Douglas John Hall, *Thinking The Faith: Christian Theology In A North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1991) 201

2. Analyze their responses with regard to the following criteria:
 - a. How do we know these things about God?
 - b. From where did we get our information?
 - c. Which resources do we assign greater authority?
 - d. How reliable are some of your sources?

II. HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT GOD? – a model for Thinking About God

Slide #29

Slide #30

1. Scripture

- a. Historical – “Unlike some other religious belief systems, Christianity contains a vital and indispensable historical component. The character and will of the God in whom Christian’s trust is manifested, first of all, not in individual religious experience but in a sequence of historical events, the culminating moment (*kairos*) of which, for the *Christian* side of biblical faith, is the event of the Christ... So long as a community designates itself ‘Christian,’ it is beholden to the scriptural testimony to the foundational historical events which establish the fundamental character of Christian belief.”¹³ The Bible is of immediate and primary significance because it is the sole witness to this foundational history. God, in Jesus Christ, entered into history at a specific time and in a specific place. God revealed much of God’s self through Jesus Christ and we are therefore dependent upon the witness of the Christ event in history for our Thinking About God.
- b. Received by Faith - It is to be learned and therefore requires a continual, life long dialog. Faith which intends to be Christian must be prepared to listen to and submit itself to the authority of the Scriptures. The God with whom Christian faith has to

¹³ Ibid. 257 - 258

do is the one who is revealed in the events testified to in the Bible. It is received by faith.

Slide #31

1-A **The Role of Scripture and Thinking About God**

Slide #32

- a. The Secularist charge of relativism – Secularists claim that the Bible is the product of human beings and therefore should not be singled out as if it contained ultimate truth. Hall acknowledges that the secularist charge cannot be responded to in any fully convincing way. However, that does not mean that the response cannot be grasped by common sense. Christians confess that the God in whom we believe is revealed in particular historical events and persons. Therefore, we must have access to the most reliable witnesses to those events and persons. “You cannot demonstrate objectively that God has ‘spoken,’ through these persons and these events; and you cannot demonstrate either that those who recorded these things or commented upon them were either faithful to ‘the facts’ or perceptive in their interpretation. But at least you can insist that the Bible, being the only or the primary testimony to occurrences which you believe to be ultimately significant, is indispensable to your discipline. The secularist may reject your belief as such, but, given the nature of what you believe, he or she cannot reject the logic of your need for the Scriptures.”¹⁴

Slide #33

Slide #34

- b. The Fundamentalist charge of literalism – The fundamentalist insists that the Bible be accepted literally and uncritically; that it is inerrant in its form and content. The

¹⁴ Ibid. 260

Fundamentalist sets about to elevate the Bible to the level of absolutes. The response to literalism, Hall asserts, comes from the Bible itself – which they should appreciate above everyone else! For witness and writers of scripture, the Truth is nothing more or less than God in person, the living God, the Incarnate Word. The scriptural witness points to the God who is the only absolute. One of the greatest teachings of the Bible is that “Thou shall have no other God’s before me.” Therefore, the literalist is equally guilty of idolatry as those whom they berate for absolutizing holy objects, saints, or ecclesial authorities. It is even Jesus Himself who has His strongest polemic against those who absolutize the letter of the law. The aim of the Biblical witness is to point to the absolute – God – and is not an absolute itself.

Slide #35

Summary –

The Bible is the foundational witness to the revealing events of God in history. The knowledge or acceptance of this revelation is not given automatically at birth nor is it gained automatically at the second birth. It is something that must be learned and engaged dialogically throughout life’s journey. The Bible is primary for the Christian and for Thinking About God. Scripture points to the God of our faith and is but a means to that end and not the end itself.

Slide #36

Slide #37

2. Tradition –

- a. Doctrinal Tradition – The word *Tradition* comes from the Latin *tradere* and it means to “hand over,” “to deliver.” It is perhaps better and more accurate to say “traditions,” rather than “tradition,” because the interpretations and articulations of Christian belief have varied widely through the history of the church. Hall states that

these articulations have not been sufficiently unified or congruent to constitute a single entity. Therefore, “traditions” is perhaps more faithful to our received understanding of God and faith.

Even just a quick study in the history of the church would demonstrate the constant state of flux our understanding of God has undergone. Different traditions throughout history have swung back and forth between seemingly contradictory interpretations of the faith. Augustine’s influence by Plato was abandoned for Aristotelian forms by the medieval theologian Aquinas, only to swing back to Platonic forms with Luther and the German Reformation. Even Western Christendom which was, and in some spheres remains, largely influenced by the substitutionary atonement theory is now being challenged and replaced by a Liberationist preference for the *Christus Victor* model, or Christ as victor over evil and oppressive powers. So we quite literally have a wealth of doctrinal traditions to draw from as we Think About God; traditions even outside of our identified denomination.

These traditions are vital to our ongoing process of Thinking About God. Christianity, as it has already been stated, is founded upon God’s involvement in history which culminated in the Christ event. Therefore, our Thinking About God is predicated upon history and histories interpretation of these events over time. Traditions are the roots which reach back in time that nourish and sustain our current Thinking About God. Since Theology has these roots, no one should be content with, nor should they desire, to strictly spin theology out of their own personal experiences. Hall states that a Christian theologian lacking any past would be an anomaly.

So, as we go about our Thinking About God, we look to the traditions that have gone on before us. We resource such traditions as the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, The Book of Concord, the Heidelberg Catechism, Vatican II, and many other.

- b. Domestic Tradition – Christian faith is indeed a historical faith. Not only do its roots reach back to the early church, but it also flowers with the faith that is handed over to us from parents, grandparents, and our experience with our own church. These are traditions that dictate the order of worship we are accustomed to, hymns that are preferred, acceptable dress and conduct, rites and ceremonies, as well as what hot dishes and desserts are expected. We are perhaps more immediately informed by our domestic traditions than we are of the more doctrinal traditions.

Illustration – there was a little girl who was watching her mother prepare the Thanksgiving turkey for dinner. She watched her mother carefully prepare the turkey, and then, as she was placing it in the large roasting pan, she cut off both of the legs, wrapped them in tinfoil, and then placed them in a smaller pan. She then placed both pans into the oven.

The little girl was curious why her mother cut off the legs and placed them in a smaller pan. Her mother replied that that is what her mother would do every Thanksgiving. So the little girl went to her grandmother and asked her why she would cut off the turkey's legs and place them in a separate and smaller roasting pan. The grandmother replied that that is the way that her mother would prepare the turkey. So the little girl went to her great-grandmother who was asleep on a chair and woke her and asked her the same question; "Why would you cut off the turkey's legs and place them in a separate pan to cook?" The great-grandmother replied; "Oh, I did that dear because my roasting pan was too small for the whole turkey."

Domestic traditions can have a powerful and subconscious influence in our lives.

Domestic traditions are also a valuable resource for Thinking About God.

Slide #38

2-A **The Role of Tradition and Thinking About God**

So how are we to make use of Tradition in our Thinking About God? Once again, Douglas John Hall suggests that the most instructive method for considering how to utilize Tradition is to consider the way Tradition is considered today in our North American context and somewhere between the two poles we will find an appropriate use of tradition in our Thinking About God.

Slide #39

- a. Modernism/Individualism – A primary characteristic of the modern is the elevation of the individual. “The modernistic dimension of theological liberalism seeks to minimize, and - in extreme expressions, to eliminate - the regulative role of tradition in Theology.”¹⁵ Basically, as Hall states, the modernist feels free to eliminate anything from the past that does not seem readily applicable to the present. The attitude is that much of the past that has been handed down is not only irrelevant to our modern context, it is also a hindrance to the spread of the gospel.

Marcus Borg, the author of “Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time,” commented it was the doctrine of the church that caused him to fall away from faith. Borg says that years ago, confronted by the evident contradictions between his maturing sense of reality and the religious doctrine of his childhood, he stopped believing in God.

He goes on to list the doctrines that did it. They are:

- that God is a supernatural intervener in the affairs of nature and humanity
- that the bible is the Word of God and the ultimate authority on faith and morals.

¹⁵ Ibid. 267

- that we humans are sinful and guilty and deserving of punishment
- that Jesus, God's only son, died that our sins would be forgiven
- that faith in this Jesus is the only way to salvation
- that salvation means being sent to heaven when you die rather than to hell as you deserve.

For Borg, as in the modernist dimension, the measure of authenticity is detached from a doctrinal past and depends rather upon the present situation as its touchstone. Modernism in the North American context is particularly established with the aid of individualism. Tradition inherently implies some degree of religion having authority in one's life and individualism recoils from such regulation upon the self. Therefore, tradition is dismissed.

Hall gives as an example how every young clergy person straight from the seminary knows how powerless the great traditions are in the face of self-directed parishioners. "Personal preference has meant the "death of God" even among some theologians of the 1960's, even among those who continue to think of themselves as Christian."¹⁶

Slide #40

What the modernist dimension fails to acknowledge or even recognize is that it is impossible to escape the informative and influential character of tradition upon all of our long-held assumptions. Has there ever been a truly "original" thought; one that was not in some way informed by a thought which came before it? We do not live in a societal or intellectual vacuum. If that were the case then we would find ourselves continually needing to re-invent the wheel. No, the past informs virtually every aspect of the present, for we truly do stand on the shoulders of giants.

¹⁶ Ibid. 269

There is the story of a young man having a rather bombastic conversation with then President Ronald Reagan. The young man was accusing the President, and all of those of his generation, of being irrelevant and out of touch with today's youth. The young man's point of illustration was that theirs was a technological generation; one raised on computers and advanced forms of communication. The young man asserted that the President knew nothing of these new realities. To which the President responded; "No, we just invented them for you."

One cannot be so pompous as to assume that theirs is a generation that is totally self-sufficient and free from the past. As the old saying goes, "Those who don't remember the past are destined to repeat it."

Slide #41

- b. Traditionalism – this is the polar opposite of modernism. And it is a response to tradition that is equally questionable. "A traditionalistic posture conceives the real task of theology as preserving, intact, without influence or mark from the world, the entire Christian teaching handed over by the past."¹⁷ What this ultimately means is some specific set of doctrine which is not acknowledged by those who engage in it. The main benefit of modernism, and a point where traditionalism falls far short, is that it does at least concern itself with its present and future context. However, Hall states that modernism tends to equate pertinence with acceptability; "Contextual theology does not seek to be acceptable; its goal is to be appropriate."¹⁸ Traditionalism is marked by its disinterest in addressing the present realities of its particular time and place in history. It is concerned more so with the preservation of the morals, values, rituals, symbols, and teachings of the past. Rather than allowing

¹⁷ Ibid. 269

¹⁸ Ibid. 269

the present to shape the questions to be attended it enforces the answers which need to be enacted.

It is interesting to note that Traditionalism is similar to Biblicism only now the subject matter is not the Bible but dearly held doctrinal orthodoxy. What Traditionalism does, as in Biblicism, is that it takes a worldview from another time and place and substitutes it for original reflection upon our present condition. What it winds up doing is creating a refuge from the difficult task of facing the very real, very ambiguous and very unknown present. It is always far more comfortable to live with the questions of the past than to face the unknown, unresolved, and only half-understood anxieties of the present. Traditionalism “drives faith to search for a ‘usable past’; on the other hand... [it] tempts faith to take refuge in the past.”¹⁹

Slide #42

Fundamentally, traditionalism runs the danger of holding on too dearly to the orthodoxy of the past at the expense of original reflection upon the present. It also fails to recognize that even the traditions of the past were informed by their specific contexts. The Gospel of John was written in a specific time and place to a particular audience. Martin Luther was responding to a very real, very current context with regard to his desire to reform the Catholic Church. Tradition is inescapably connected to its context. It is a reality that cannot be denied in our time and place.

Slide #43

Slide #44

3. Experience –

If Tradition is something that is handed over, handed down, then experience is its polar opposite. Experience is something that we do not receive from others but rather something

¹⁹ Ibid. 270

we gain for ourselves. Experience, as I will define it, comes in two broad forms; Personal and Communal.

Personal experience – Personal experience, with regard to Thinking About God, has played a significant role in the life of faith and has developed in intricate ways throughout history. The following is a brief, and hopefully just, description of the understanding of self as it developed through the Middle Ages to present.

Slide #45

- a. The Middle Ages were largely dominated by Platonic categories with regard to self and God. The beginnings of which are seen in Origen and Augustine and carried through to Anselm, Eckhart, Aquinas²⁰ and Ockham (dates approximately from 182 C.E. to 1300 C.E.). The Middle Ages were marked by a disregard for all things temporal. According to Platonic thought, only eternal things, being comprised in the idea, were real. For theology this meant that the purely ideal center in this eternal world was God. This doctrine is Platonic in that the spirit is considered the only thing capable of knowing supreme reason, but it is imprisoned in the body in this world and will only rise after death to divinity and purity.

Anselm (1033 – 1109 C. E.) argued for a being which follows the idea of a highest and absolute, a self-existent Being, from which all other things derive their existence. God was that “which nothing greater can be thought.” In simple terms: The term "God" is defined as the greatest conceivable being. Real existence (existence in reality) is greater than mere existence in the understanding. Therefore, God must exist in reality, not just in the understanding.

Therefore, the major thrust of the Middle Ages was that of universal categories of God and Man. The self was inferior to the ideal, to God, and only in resurrection

²⁰ Aquinas, however, moved away from Platonic categories and worked out of Aristotelian categories. For Aquinas, the world was rational and ordered and rested on the being of God.

would we ascend to divinity and purity. Personal experience was of minimal importance.

- b. The Renaissance, or “re-birth,” is the period of great intellectual and cultural revival in the interest in classical culture that occurred in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – a period which was the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. As the Renaissance progressed it moved beyond its mere revival of classical studies and was experienced in every aspect of life. Philosophically, it gradually replaced the purely formal methods of thought exemplified by Platonism and scholasticism. In science it led to the great discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and Newton. The fine arts, perhaps more than all the disciplines, demonstrates the development of the self with works that celebrated humanity and individualism with such works as Michelangelo’s *David*, DaVinci’s *Vetruvian Man*, and the fleshly rendition of the human figure by Caravaggio.

From this period developed a movement of thought called “humanism.” This movement developed in the church and argued that the proper worship of God involved admiration of God’s creation, particularly the crown of creation: Humanity. It was a movement away from the heavy and constant pressure from the medieval church to confession and humility before God. Some held that we were like God in that we were co-creators and the painter, the architect, the musician, and the scholar, by exercising their intellectual powers, were fulfilling divine purposes.

In the Renaissance, the individual gained greater independence and validation. Rather than being grounded in an unknowable, pure and actual God, the individual began to celebrate our humanness in light of God’s creative activity. The Renaissance was the re-birth of the individual.

- c. The Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther, further moved away from the Middle Age belief that all of life was grounded in the mind of God and that right action, right behavior was required of the individual. Rather than being established in some artificial and unknowable God, we must rely on God's faithfulness. We are contingent upon God alone. The tautology of Luther's theology became that one must allow God to be God. This frees humans to be human. We do not have to achieve salvation; rather, it is a gift to be received by faith. For Luther and the Reformation, salvation is the presupposition of the life of the Christian and not its goal.

For the Reformation, the centrality of faith makes it evident that the personal religious experience is vital to the Christian life. However, they did not conceive of personal experience as we would define it today; the individual in all of their uniqueness as the discerning factor of theological authenticity. By allowing God to be God, authority was transferred from the Church (the pope) to scripture, which opened the door to personal reception and interpretation.

- d. The Enlightenment marked the beginning of Modernity around the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Europe out of a desire to assert and foster individual freedom. It was a response to and an alternative for the oppressive and authoritarian constraints of the Church and state; that of absolutist kings and dogmatic churches. For the Enlightenment, the individual experience became prominent rather than speculation. It was believed that individual identity needed to be self-constructed from a rational and autonomous self. The proponents of the Enlightenment held that this self can decide what is true through reason and the scientific method. Truth was believed to reside in the experiential, the empirical. Fundamentally, it made an absolute of the human intellect, reducing essential humanity to sheer mind.

The Enlightenment, the “Age of Reason,” fundamentally elevated the knowable, the tangible, and the measurable. It argued that the bible itself demonstrates an appeal to the mind (the term *logos* and Paul’s address to the philosophically minded in Acts 17).

- e. The Romantic period was a form of rebellion against this purely reasonable and rational positioning of the self. Individuality, humanness, for the Romantic was not limited to a purely intellectual description. The “Romantic” escaped from the world of reason to a world of emotionalism. While both the modern and the romantic sought a return to nature, the modern did so seeing nature as the source of reason while the romantic saw it as wild, unbridled and untamed. Romantics believed that if people only behaved “naturally,” giving over to their emotional impulses, evil would disappear. Artwork once again illustrates the tenor of the Romantic spirit; Gericault’s painting *The Raft of the “Medusa,”* Fuseli’s *The Nightmare,* and Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique.* The Romantic valued the extrarational.

Theologically, it was Friedrich Schleiermacher (the father of liberalism) who gave extrarational experience a key place in religious knowledge. The point of departure for faith, he asserted, is not reason nor authority but experience, the feeling of absolute dependency. The individual and their experience, their feelings, became the authority for authentic faith.

- f. Postmodernism – much of the Romantic character is now reappearing in what is being termed “Postmodernism.” Postmodernism is marked by a rebellion against the modern rational sensibilities. Once again, personal, extrarational experience is elevated as the touchstone of authentic religious experience. Thinking About God is considered not an exercise in rational thought but rather broad experientially based intuition or “feeling.”

Extrarational experience is part of our history for Thinking About God, but it also poses some problems for it is suspicious of rational theology.

Slide #46

Assessment of Personal Experience

Positive – personal experience has a positive influence in that it serves as a touch stone for truth. What corresponds to human experience is acceptable, what does not should be discarded as irrelevant. If it can be shown that in our experience there is something that corresponds to traditional concepts, such as the Trinity or sin, then it is meaningful to employ this concept still. For example the doctrine sin; if sin is defined as “missing the mark,” and the mark that is missed is loving God and loving neighbor (the two greatest commandments), then, for me personally, this is congruent with my lived experience. I do not love God as I ought and I certainly fall short of loving my neighbor as myself. The concept of sin, therefore, remains meaningful and continues to be employed within my belief system.

Negative – experience can cross the boundary and become the primary measure of the authenticity of theology. When this is the case, the faith community no longer has a reliable vantage point from which to reflect critically upon – experience itself!

Slide #47

Communal experience – Much of our experience is also informed by the norms and standards of our given society and community. We live and interact within a world of mutually agreed upon and accepted values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Communal experience, like personal experience, is gained for and defined by ourselves in community.

III. Summary

Slide #48

Slide #49

*Possible designations? Christian Modernist; experience and scripture. Christian Secularist; experience and tradition. Christian Traditionalist/Fundamentalist; tradition and scripture.

IV. CLOSING EXERCISE

1. Offer a few typical statements about God and have the participants think through what they believe informs those statements.
 - a. God helps those who help themselves.
 - b. God loves a cheerful giver.
 - c. We are justified through faith alone.
 - d. The Apostle's Creed.
 - e. God works all things for good
 - f. Other's

Slide #50

Session III

PART 5

**HOW DOES WHAT WE THINK ABOUT GOD
INFORM OUR DECISIONS AND ACTIONS?**

I. Introduction and Overview

Slide #51

Slide #52

1. What Does It Mean To Think About God? –
 - a. Thinking About God is “fundamentally an attempt to make positive and constructive statements about *who* God is – and *who* we are in light of who God is.”²¹
 - b. Thinking About God is a communal event for we can only fully understand who God is – and who we are in light of who God is – in community, in relationships, in conversation with one another.
 - c. Thinking About God means relevancy for Thinking About God, when intentionally done within the community, and not secluded in academia or in seclusion, will inherently be contextual; addressing the communities realities – and therefore have a higher degree of relevancy.

To this point I have defined what it means to Think About God, what exactly that discipline is. It is our communal attempted to make positive and constructive statements about who God is and who we are in light of who God is. When it is done in community it will necessarily have a higher degree of relevancy.

Slide #53

1. Why Do We Think About God? –

²¹ Michael Jinkins, *Invitation To Theology: A Guide To Study, Conversation & Practice* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 30

- a. To make sense of our lived experience
- b. Christian thinking is a dimension of Christian being
- c. Christendom in America is no longer a reality

I defined as well why we undertake this discipline of Thinking About God; it is our attempt to make sense of life from a Christian worldview. Thinking About God is also a necessary component to our Christian being because our hearts can only passionately embrace a truth to the extent that our minds can make sense out of it. We also Think About God because the world around us is constantly changing; we are not to conform to the world, but we are to be transformed by the renewing of our mind (Romans 12:2).

Slide #54

1. How Do We Think About God? –
 - a. Scripture
 - b. Tradition
 - c. Experience

And then, at our last session, we considered a model for how we Think About God; Scripture, Tradition and Experience. It was noted that as Christians we are primarily beholden to scripture because it is the foundational testimony of the historical events which establish the fundamental character of Christian belief. As Christians we assert that scripture is the primary means through which God has chosen to reveal God's self. Therefore, we must submit whatever question we have of our lived experience to the witness of the Bible, and then to tradition, and then our own personal experiences. This is a "textbook model" for Thinking About God.

Slide #55

Michael Jenkins shares the following example:

“Any particular belief that is under scrutiny would need to be run through these various filters or be seen in light of these various authorities in order to discern whether or not we will accept it as trustworthy. For instance, someone says that she believes that God is absolutely powerful. So she goes to the Bible to see whether her idea of God’s absolute power is consistent with what the Scriptures say; then she examines her idea of God’s power in light of the great confessions of faith and the teachings of the church’s greatest teachers like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and so forth. Then she asks around the church she attends to fine out what others think. And finally she looks deep into her own experience of life. At every step along the way she weighs her understanding against these tests of authority. And this is great!”²²

However, as Jinkins goes on to point out, this isn’t how life really works. Life is far more complicated, a far more tangled web, than to be able to work through challenges to our worldview in linear, logical fashion. We don’t start out cognitively. We start out by living, by experiencing. Our worldview is shaped largely by our parents, our friends, our social circles. It is they that have influenced the way we walk, the way we talk, the things we value and the things we believe. We move through life, largely contented in our worldview. It isn’t until a critical moment, moment of crises, that our foundational values, beliefs and convictions are called into question. We begin Thinking About God by living, by personal experience.

Slide #56

Truly, the way we begin to Think About God is to live life, to experience life in community and communion with others. It is only when we live out life relationally that we fully encounter not only God and the other, but also ourselves. We further develop our understanding of who God is - and who we are in light of who God is - when we open

²² Ibid. 67

ourselves up to and engage in relationships in our daily lived out experiences. It is here that our worldview is exercised, is utilized, is challenged as well as is challenging, corrected as well as is correcting. It is our lived out experience that formulates the questions for which our worldview must respond. It is not in our delivering God to the world but rather in the discovering God active in the world that we begin to Think About God and to grow in our understanding about how God is revealing God's self to be in our place and our moment in history. Thinking About God, then, is primarily an intentional and responsible response to our lived out experience.

When we are confronted with those critical moments, those moments of crises that call into question our worldview, our understanding of who God is and who we are in light of who God is, that is the moment when we can engage intentionally the model of Thinking About God. And what follows is a proposed method for beginning this process – and it is a process. And as a process, it is something that develops over time. It doesn't relinquish immediate answers or insights, but rather requires an investment of time, energy, and vulnerability, that, if done honestly, will pay dividends...

Slide #57

Slide #58

II. A Method for Thinking About God

How does what we Think About God inform our decisions and actions; personally, congregationally, nationally, and globally? In order to begin to process our life experience in light of our Christian worldview, we can begin to work the model on how to Think About God. But as it was pointed out, engaging the model rarely ever happens by the textbook example; unless you are a pastor or professor who is working on a predefined thesis. We begin to engage God through our lived experience and it is those experiences that initiate our reflecting upon where God is in all of this.

*Slide #59***1. Articulate** –

The initial step to the method of Thinking About God is to articulate the experience in question. What is it that happened that is the cause for you to Think About God? Begin to process what it is that has happened. What are the factual events that took place? When did it take place? Where did it take place? Who was involved? How did you feel? How did you react? What is the issue that demands reflection? This is the process of recalling the specifics of the event that you will be reflecting upon. Begin to name the major issue or issues that are in play in this event.

Example: the little girl who is hit and killed by the drunk driver. Dealing with homosexuality. The decline in membership of the local congregation. The impending layoffs at Kodak. Pluralism in America. American “Greed” or the collapse of the “American Dream.” Ecological considerations. Etc.

*Slide #60***2. Attend** –

From the information you developed through your articulation of the event, begin to create an image or metaphor based on this event. Are there any other stories or illustrations or anecdotes that are similar to your lived experience that come immediately to mind?

(Scripturally - with regard to the tragic death of the little girl; Romans 8:28, “and we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God...” or Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Or Romans 7:19, “For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.” As well as other possible scripture.

Traditionally - we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

Experientially – we know what God commands, we know good from evil, and yet we struggle to do what is right, and the just (and unjust) suffer. “Damned if you do – damned if you don’t.”)

Begin to retrieve elements from our religious tradition related to this experience.

- a. Scripture - What does scripture have to say about the issue? What scriptures come to mind?

Resources:

- i. Bible – a good study bible with footnotes, a reliable translation such as The New International Version (NIV), The New American Standard Bible (NASB), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), these are all reliable and authoritative translations.
- ii. Commentary – There are a variety of good commentaries to choose from, such as: William Barclay, Sacra Pagina and the Inspiration series.
- iii. Concordance – A concordance is a book that lists all of the individual words of the Bible for quick resourcing. They often include other helpful tools; such as a listing of the parable, miracles, and teachings of Jesus, the prophecies fulfilled by Jesus, a harmony of the gospels, topical indexes. It is a helpful resource for quickly locating topical issues of the Scriptures. Strongs Exhaustive concordance.
- iv. Bible dictionary – the Bible dictionary defines terms such as names, places, and events that took place in the Bible.
- v. Pastor/Professor

- b. Tradition – What does Tradition have to say about the issue?

- i. Doctrinally – from your particular denominational heritage from the Lutherans we have the book of Concord to draw from.
- ii. Domestically – what has been your received tradition from your church experience and family experience?

- c. Experience – What does experience have to say about this issue?
 - i. Personal – what has been your experience? How do you feel about it?
 - ii. Communal – semiotics, the study of signs and symbols.

Slide #61

3. Assert –

Begin to engage the input from the model you just attended to. How does the information you gained from attending to the issue clarify, challenge and/or affirm your experience? This is an important stage where you need to honestly and openly engage all other voices in order to challenge and be challenged; correct and be corrected.

Slide #62

- 4. Agree –** attempt to reach some agreements on your assertions. Is there a common ground of which you can explore further? Select one area upon which you can focus. What are some concrete steps that you can take that are faithful to your Thinking About God.

Slide #63

- 5. Act –** set a plan of action complete with action items and timelines for completion. Assign tasks to individuals and see it through.

Slide #64

- 6. Assess –** after a stated period of time, assess what has taken place. Is it consistent with what you had expected? Was it efficacious? How did you experience God in your acting? Was it consistent with your attending? This should push you forward into new areas of Thinking About God. After a period of time, assess your progress towards making positive and constructive statements about who God is – and who you are in light of who God is within this current experience. This should lead you into further Thinking About God.

Slide #65

Slide #66

III. Review

Slide #67

1. Thinking About God Means
 - a. Our attempt to know *who* God is – and *who* we are in light of who God is.
 - b. A communal event in that we can only truly know God and ourselves in Community.
 - c. Necessarily contextual – and relevant - when done in community

Slide #68

2. Why Do We Think About God?
 - a. To make sense of our lived experience
 - b. Christian thinking is a dimension of Christian being
 - c. Christendom in America is no longer a reality

Slide #69

3. How Do We Think About God?
 - a. Scripture
 - b. Tradition
 - c. Experience

Slide #70

4. How Does What We Think About God Inform Our Decisions And Actions? : A Method For Thinking About God.
 - a. Articulate
 - b. Attend
 - c. Assert
 - d. Agree
 - e. Act
 - f. Assess

Slide #71

Slide #72

Slide #73

IV. Exercise

Take some time and discuss some possible life situations that would merit working the model and the method. This is a chance to begin inviting the participants to share some of their lived experiences that would benefit from Thinking About God.

Epilogue –

The first group of leaders and members that worked through this study came up with several thoughts that they wanted to continue to explore over the coming year to further Think About God in our context. One issue of particular concern is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's study on homosexuality. This is a topic that several members wish to think more about and add their prayers and voice to this challenging issue. They also want to explore the global issue of the discrepancy of wealth both abroad but also here in America in light of all of the corporate scandals of the past couple of years. Finally, the other issue we want to work through is discerning how God is working in our community and attempt to discover new and effective ways to nurture and nourish God's working in the community as well as more effectively proclaim the gospel.

The first study was very successful (however, the power point presentation did not work on the last evening – I had a bad disk. So we worked off the handout). I will be offering the study again and am finding that every time I come back to it I continue to improve upon it.

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